

Interview with Congressman Bob Filner, part one

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Location: Office of Congressman Bob Filner, 2428 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C.

Present: Congressman Bob Filner, Dr. Fred W. Beuttler Ph. D., and Anthony A. Wallis

Transcribed by Roger L. Robinson

Anthony Wallis: My first question is this: Upon entering Congress, after you were elected as a Member, you immediately requested an appointment to the Veterans' Affairs Committee. Just out of curiosity, why was that? What made it appeal to you so much, outside of the other committees in the House of Representatives?

Congressman Bob Filner: Well, I had run into Senator Alan Cranston from California who was retiring that same year that I was elected. He was a friend of mine for a long time. He asked me what committees I was going to try and get on. And I said, "Well, I'm a historian of science, so maybe science. I'm an educator, so maybe education." He said, "How about veterans?" And I said, "I'm not a veteran." He said, "Bingo (AAW laughs). That's why you should be on it."

San Diego has as many veterans and active duty as probably any place in the nation, and I needed to learn the issues. So he said, "Get on the Veterans' Committee." So I followed his advice, and it was good advice. I mean, I had to learn the issues, but politically, it didn't hurt me that, with so many veterans in my community, they saw me as very actively in favor of veterans. I've got to tell this story at some point, so I'd better tell it now.

Dr. Fred W. Beuttler: Sure. Go ahead (BF and AAW laugh).

BF: I was the first one to ask, it turned out, so I was the first one in seniority in my class. We had a large number on the Veterans' Committee. So, that's why I'm chairman because I asked first. The chairmen of the committees used to have a tradition that they would have a dinner for all of the freshmen, sort of the first week when we were coming to Congress, and we had the first dinner at Statuary Hall at the Capitol. It's overwhelming as a freshman. You know that you're surrounded by all of this history.

I had looked up who the chairman of the Veterans' Committee was and his name was Sonny Montgomery. Frankly, I had never heard of him. Although, there was the Montgomery G.I. Bill, and he was known as Mr. Veteran. I mean, I learned all of this after the case. But I looked up his record and he was a very conservative Democrat, and I was supposed to be a liberal Democrat. So, I was wondering how we would get along. And I met him that evening.

I said, "Hello, Mr. Chairman." I knew enough to say that. But I didn't know what else to say to him. So, I blurted out that I was once a tourist in his state. And he said, "What do you mean by that?" I said, "Well, I took a Greyhound bus down to Jackson, Mississippi. The police chief showed me around the city jail very nicely, and the sheriff of Hines County showed me around the county jail. Then, I spent a couple of months in the State penitentiary." And he knew right away what I was talking about. This was the freedom rides. He said, "What dates were you arrested?" I said, "June 12, 1961." He said, "Well, I was the head of the National Guard that arrested you."

AAW: Oh wow (laughs).

BF: So, I went back to my table. I told my wife, "Our career is finished. I'm here one day and we're all ready in trouble." But three days later, it was traditional for the chairman to introduce the new members, and I was first. He said, "This here is the distinguished gentleman from California, Bob Filner. We've been close friends for thirty-five years (AW laughs)." The other freshmen wondered how he even knew my name. I learned a very important lesson: it's relationships that count, you know. We happen to have this sort of bond. We played with it for all of the years that he was in Congress. He came to campaign for me. He mentored me on the committee. So, I have very fond memories of him, even though he put me in jail (AW laughs).

FWB: How was he as a chairman? Do you remember? You came on in 1992-1993.

BF: This was my freshman year, my freshman term. We were only, as Democrats, in control for that one term. So, I was pretty new. I didn't know one thing from another. I didn't know what was the norm and what wasn't. He was very personable, which a lot of chairmen apparently aren't. Before we had offices, he gave me room in the committee room to use. I mean, I didn't realize that that was something special. But most chairmen at the time were pretty, what shall I say, autocratic in terms of setting the agenda and the pace of the committee.

I don't remember that we had a lot of meetings as Democrats, or that we had a lot to say as to what was happening. Again, I was so new that I didn't know what the norm was. I mean, the Democrats had been in power for forty years. There was a system of autocratic rule, I think, although his personality was warm and friendly. I mean, they all ran the committees without a lot of input as far as I could tell. I watched some of the younger guys on the committee, like Joe Kennedy, argue with him a lot.

I remember at one point there was some dispute between Joe and Sonny. Sonny said something about, "Well, your questions are getting better after six terms here," or whatever terms he was there. And Joe said, "Yes. I'm getting closer to the top, too." But again, I don't remember a lot of what was supposed to happen or how things were run

because I didn't know what the norms were, but he was very nice to me. But we didn't have a lot of input into what was happening.

FWB: Right. What was the transition like when the Republicans took over and the committee chairmen changed? He was still the ranking member for a while.

BF: Yes. It didn't seem, from the bottom, to be very different. I didn't realize until I became the chairman how the minority had one big room and the majority had suites of offices until I became the chairman. And then, I got all of these suites of offices. I think that the first chairman then was Bob Stump. They had known each other for a long time. They had served on the Armed Forces Committee. So, there was not a lot of enmity between those two. As I got more confidence in the committee and stuff, I challenged Mr. Stump quite a bit on the committee.

For example, one year he didn't want to have a discussion on the budget. So, we just didn't have a discussion on the budget. So I started. I said, "I have a point of order," or something like that. I said, "Why can't we talk about this? It's the most important thing we do. He tried to gavel me down, and I kept talking. He got so mad at one point that I thought he was going to throw the gavel. He stood up, and he was getting red in the face and was waving the gavel. I thought one of us was going to die (AW laughs). That is, he was going to throw the thing at me, or he was going to have a heart attack. I got under his skin a little bit.

But I have a sense of how a democratic institution ought to run, and he didn't have that same sense. And as chair, I try to put those things into effect that I didn't see that I had when I was a younger member. But I couldn't tell the kind of change in the policy there was. At some point, I don't know if it was my third, fourth, or fifth term. I don't remember now. I became the ranking member of one of the subcommittees. As the ranking member, I had all of a sudden three staff people, all of whom were incredibly knowledgeable.

And so, in that two year period, I probably wrote most of the legislation coming out of our committee, and I didn't realize until then how much professional staff provided influence and power. When you're new, you just don't even know what you don't have, and that was the first glimpse I really had of what professional staff means. In fact, the top staff person, I have to mention her name. Her name was Jill Cochran. She happened to be the daughter of Tiger Teague, who was a famous Congressman from Texas. I don't think he was the chairman of the Veterans' Committee.

FWB: Yes he was.

BF: He was the chairman of the Veterans' Committee?

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FWB: Yes.

BF: So, I didn't realize that I had this great historical sort of connection with Jill. She was really good. Apparently, my predecessor—I don't know who it was—not very active or aggressive, and I gave her a chance to do all of this legislation. So, it gave me a sense of what the staff could do.

FWB: Did it seem like it was a very partisan committee? It didn't seem like an issue that would be very partisan.

BF: Yes. But as I got more confidence and knowledge, I realized, for example, that budgets were key to what we did, and I didn't think that Republicans had budgets that were big enough. We still had the Clinton Administration until 2000. Jesse Brown was the secretary at the VA through most of Clinton's terms, I think, and he was handed a budget that he thought was insufficient. He barged into Clinton's office and said, "You've got to do better." So, we had this story of a guy who was fighting for the veterans, but his successors were not as strong as he was. So, those issues would come up.

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Once that decision had been made, everything becomes part of the package. It's hard to be against benefits, and I didn't realize a lot of the politics round all of it. I just wasn't in a position high enough, or my knowledge was not sufficient. When Chris Smith from New Jersey became chairman, he was a very good chairman who always tried to raise the budget. So, he got along with all of the Democrats. Apparently, he didn't get along with Republicans who removed him as chairman. In fact, they took him off of the committee after twenty-five years, which I thought was not very just.

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And when Buyer from Indiana became the chairman, things changed dramatically. That's because he was not as strong for good budgets as Chris Smith was, and his personality and mine just grated on each other. And for the last couple of years of his chairmanship, our ranking member was Lane Evans, a great member, a veteran, and a great fighter for veterans' causes. He was the one, I think, that carried the ball to get Agent Orange recognized as an important item for veterans. He got very sick during his last few years in Congress. He had Parkinson's Disease, and he was not able to present the Democratic position very well. So, I sort of took on the job myself without being appointed to it.

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So, there were a lot of fights between me and Buyer when he was the chairman which have continued since I've been the chairman. Our personalities are very different, and we have different views of what the Veterans' Administration should do or be. And it turns out that there is a lot of politics around that, besides just the budget. Just as an example, if you think that only service-connected veterans should be allowed to use the Veterans Administration, which Mr. Buyer thinks, and I think that every veteran should be allowed to use it, you're going to have major arguments about that. I think we ought to expand what the G.I. Bill does for veterans, but the Republicans have historically been much

more constrained fiscally. So, you're going to have fights over that. So, there are places that you would think should be completely bipartisan, but they're not always.

AAW: You were talking a little bit about your early career on the committee. You came in here just learning the ropes and how things worked. Were there any examples of some early legislation that you proposed, that was kind of like an early victory for you, or that you worked alongside Mr. Montgomery with, that kind of solidified you as you were making your way up?

BF: Yes. You know, I should be able to remember. As I said, when I was ranking member of the House Benefits Subcommittee, Jill Cochran was a very knowledgeable person. She had been sort of holding legislation for a long time, because my predecessor, who I don't know who he was, wasn't very aggressive. And we passed a lot of bills. Frankly, I can't remember what would be the best one. I'll have to think about that. But we passed a lot of legislation. I mean, it was stuff like insurance, or insurance benefits, for example, or what rights you have as a retiree versus with a disability, and what benefits you got there. I mean, she was sort of directing me. Although, I guess her orders, or her agenda, came from the chairman, but it looked like we were being pretty aggressive. It was probably a combination of her wanting to use her knowledge more effectively and what the chairman wanted to do. But we never really met. For example, one of the things I do as the chairman is that every two weeks I meet with my subcommittee chairmen. At alternate times, I meet with the Democratic members. Sonny never did that, as far as I know. I think, by the time that I was the ranking member, he may have retired, but Lane Evans never had those meetings. And Sonny never had them as far as I know. So, I'm trying to do it differently. But it was pretty, not technical, but on regulations, not big policy issues. Like right now, we're going to do a major revision of the GI Bill. Well, the last time it was done was with Sonny Montgomery in 1984, and it was called the Montgomery G.I. Bill. So, we're going to do a major update on that, and a major expansion of, say, mental health resources. We're going to try to cut through the big backlog of disability claims. So we have some big issues besides just the budget. I don't think we did those kinds of things. We've done, more or less, minor things, for example C.O.L.A. increases. It wasn't big changes that were proposed or done.

FWB: Now, you've just come into the chairmanship, a little over a year ago, but you watched a new war starting. And now, you're heading Veterans' Affairs while there is a war going on. How do you think that has impacted policy issues that the committee wrestles with, and also the different kind of veteran that's there?

BF: Well, let me do it on two planes, one politically first, and then I guess one personally. I mean, I was against the war from the beginning. I meet with veterans a lot. I visit with them. I had to meet with a lot of the wounded coming back from that war, and I took a trip with the secretary of the Veterans Administration to Iraq and

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Afghanistan. And I just personally felt that these are tremendous kinds of people, who are doing what they've been asked to do. You know, they're not political. They're not going to determine whether they're there or not. So, I decided, even though I was against the war, you've got to be for taking care of those coming back from the war. So, taking care of the kids, even though I was against the war, was very important, and as someone who was against the Vietnam War, I remember that we didn't distinguish between the war and the warrior. And we sort of said, "Oh, we don't even think about those who fought." That was a big mistake. So, I don't want to make the same mistake again. And it turns out that, in this war, there are some very distinctive kinds of issues that were around before, but not in the same way. Brain injuries, for example, are very significant. There may have been an injury because a blast went off. The mental issues around post traumatic stress disorders, PTSD, are incredibly widespread. So, we have a different kind of veteran. At the same time, have older veterans who are in great need, Vietnam veterans especially. So, you've got to figure out how to do both, and I don't think the Veterans Administration was either asking for or was prepared with enough resources to do them both. So, that became our major crusade. The Washington Post did a story about a year ago on Walter Reed. Although Walter Reed is not a veterans' hospital, most people don't know one from the other. And besides, the same problems were evident in V.A. hospitals. It gave us a very dramatic reason for improving the veterans' budget a great quantity. In fact, we did a 30% increase for healthcare. Now, for one, it was unprecedented in the history of the V.A., but two, it was completely different than every other agency that was being even. So, the commitment that was not around with Vietnam with those of us that opposed the war is to really take care of these veterans.

FWB: Okay. Well, I know you're running out of time. We could come back.

BF: If you're after some specific things, I'd be happy to do it again.

FWB: Sure. There was another thing, and this is off in some ways, but, as you may know, the last World War I veteran is still alive. And Tony mentioned that the last French veteran passed away last week, which I didn't realize.

BF: I wanted to go and visit him. I saw he came to the White House. And his last name happens to be the last name of my chief of staff.

FWB: Yes. I went back and pulled some of the material. I don't know if you'd be interested in it. But I thought I'd pass it along.

BF: Is it about him?

FWB: No. It's not about him, but you may know that the first Unknown Soldier to rest in the rotunda was from World War I in 1921. And this is sort of a file, not just the Senate declaring Armistice Day and that start, but also a series of what they did. These are just

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old newspaper clippings, but I thought you may be interested in some of those. It's because they had this huge procession where President Harding and Woodrow Wilson walked all the way from the Capitol and all the way to Arlington, as they brought him in. They had this big ceremony, where they disinterred in France and came back, and Marshall Foch was here. It was a very interesting experience of honoring that group of veterans. They actually had to clear out some of the confederate unknown soldiers from Arlington in order to have a special place for this fellow. So, it's an interesting experience in how that happened.

BF: Are there previous histories of the V.A. committee?

FWB: Yes.

BF: I'd like to see that. Do you get into some of the stories that I was telling? Do you use that stuff?

FWB: Well, we'd like to expand it a little bit further. It was last done in 1990, but it was very short on narrative, and most of it is just lists of committees. It has a very short introduction. It also has a chart here, of the different kinds of jurisdictions of committees because some of the jurisdictions were split. Well, we're trying to expand this section. It's not going to be ten times as large. But we'd like to get some of the policy changes that took place, and that's really about all of the narrative. But you've got to get going.

BF: Thanks so much.

FWB: Yes.